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## Review of Atrocities against Rohingya Muslims: An Appraisal

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## Abstract:

Rohingya Muslims are Myanmar's minority but they have been facing brutal riots and genocide for several years. This genocide in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a tragedy for the whole world of humanity. All major powers have remained silent on this incident, Rohingya Muslims evicted from their homes brutally, beaten, and killed. This paper critically evaluates how ruthless riots against Rohingya Muslims took place and how they took refuge in Bangladesh in bad conditions. Current research has mainly been conducted through primary and secondary sources including e. books,

newspapers, electronic media, available official records, and documents from offices, archives, and libraries. The analytical and descriptive research critically examines the different aspects of genocide against Rohingya Muslims. This paper further highlights the indifference of the Myanmar leader, the riots could have ended if the Myanmar government had wanted to, but the silence of Myanmar leaders sparked genocide and today the millions of Rohingya Muslims are forced to live in other countries.

**Keywords:** Myanmar, Burma, Muslims, Genocide, Refugees

## 1 Background

Burma was the part of India, which seceded in 1935 and is now on the world map as an independent state. The country, which has a majority of Buddhists, also accommodated Rohingya Muslims. These Muslims have lived there for centuries, and Burma also remained under the influence of Arabs, Portuguese and British, Muslims were few but maintained their identity. This Indo-Aryan Ethnic group was settled in the Rakhine State of Myanmar a hundred years ago. But after 1982, they were deprived of basic rights and were not given citizenship.<sup>1</sup> They were also barred from getting an education and government jobs, which worsened their economic situation and forced them to live a cosmopolitan life in Myanmar. Another extreme form of oppressing is that instead of recognizing the oppressed Muslims of Myanmar as Rohingya, the Myanmar government is calling them as Bengali community. They were also given the impression that they had migrated from Chittagong, Bangladesh, and this impression became popular because Myanmar Government declared them refugees and expelled them from Myanmar as soon as possible. Rohingya Muslims are living here since 1785, about 35,000 people from Rakhine State took refuge in Chittagong, British Bengal and they wanted to take refuge in the British Raj because of the growing atrocities in the Rakhine State.<sup>2</sup>

“An article was published on the Burma Empire by the British writer Francis Bujchanan Hamilton in 1799 and according to which, those people who have been settled in Arakan State, presently known as Rohingya or Native people of Arakan State”.<sup>3</sup>

The British Government had also asked the Bengalis to migrate to the Arkan state so that they could go there and cultivate. The honourable East India Company broadened its

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<sup>1</sup> “Myanmar Seeking Ethnic Cleansing says UN Official as Rohingya Flee Persecution”, *The Guardian*, November 24, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> “Myanmar Seeking Ethnic Cleansing says UN Official as Rohingya Flee Persecution”, *The Guardian*, November 24, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> AP Finds Mass Graves Latest Evidence of Rohingya Genocide in Myanmar, *CBS News*, February 1, 2018.

presidency from Bengal to Arakan State. At that time there was no international boundary between Bengal and Arakan. Due to these migrations in the British Raj, historians are agreed that in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Rohingya Muslims came to the British Colonies.<sup>4</sup>

“A prominent historian Thant Myint-U observed that when the 20<sup>th</sup> century began, Many Indians came to Burma and they came to Burma every year in the number of a quarter of a million. Their number continues to grow until 1927, the number of migrants reached 480,000 people and Rangoon city also broke the big immigration record of New York City which was known as the greatest immigration port in the world. The number of migrants was only 13 million of Burma’s total population and the rate is the same as in the United Kingdom, which still welcomes two million people every year. Rangoon, Akyab, Bassein, and Moulmein are the largest cities of Burma (Myanmar), the Indian immigrants make up a majority of the population. From November 1885 until 1937, entire Burma was officially a large province in the British Indian Empire, and it is about the time when Burma got the status of a separate colony within the Great British Empire”.<sup>5</sup>

When Burma was part of India in 1931, the Muslim population was 584,839 at the time of the census, 396,504 were Indian Muslims while 1,474 were Chinese Muslims and 186,861 were Burmese Muslims. 41% of Burmese Muslims lived in Arkan State. During Pakistan Movement, Rohingya Muslims of Arkan State started a movement in West Burma to make the region part of East Pakistan. It is worth mentioning here that in 1948, before the independence of Burma, the Muslim Heads of Arkan State met with Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and urged him that the Arkan State should be integrated with East Pakistan based on religious harmony and geography. But Quaid-e-Azam replied to the Arkan leaders that he was not in a position to interfere in Burma’s political affairs.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 Introduction

Burma is now known as Myanmar, located in Southeast Asia surrounded by the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh, and India from the West and China, Laos, and Thailand from the East. Buddhists are the dominant majority with 90% population and the Muslim minority is 4%.<sup>7</sup> The genocide of Rohingya Muslims in the most modern century of humanity is a moment of alarming situation for all human beings that the minorities and their rights are not protecting, even today the minorities and especially their rights are not

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<sup>4</sup> “The Coming of Islam to Burma down to 1700”, *The Bulletin of Burma Historical Research Commission*, 1963. p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> S. Q. Fatimi, *The Role of China in the Spread of Islam in South East Asia*, University of Singapore, 1959, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingya’s: Inside Myanmar’s Genocide*, London: Cambridge University Press, p. 21.

being protected based on genocide. Rakhine State which was once known as Arkhan is located in the northern part of Myanmar. Ethnic riots between Rohingya Muslims and Buddhists are a stigma between 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.<sup>8</sup> The period of riots begin in Second World War when Japan invaded Burma and after some time British colonialism came to an end. Because of these circumstances, a dispute arose between the Arkhan Muslims and Buddhists. Muslims took refuge in Japanese occupied territories while Buddhists took refuge in northern areas of Arkhan. The Rohingya Muslim leaders also asked the British government to integrate the Arkhan region into East Pakistan but their request was rejected.<sup>9</sup>

“For the creation of an autonomous Muslim zone, many political and militant movements rose during the 1950s, and the term Rohingya was used by the militants for their identity”.<sup>10</sup>

The Myanmar government also carried out many military operations to quell resistance from local Rohingya Muslims. The first operation took place in 1950 and the second in 1952 which raised their voices for their rights, the Myanmar government launched operation Monsoon in the same year and this continued till the 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

### 3 Rohingya Freedom Movements

To gain freedom from genocide and oppression, the Muslims of Rohingya first formed their party titled Rohingya Independence Front (RIF) on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1964.<sup>12</sup> This aimed to establish a free Muslim zone for the Rohingya Muslims. In 1969 it was renamed to Rohingya Independence Army then again changed on 12 September as Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF). This party was reorganised by Muhammad Younis and Muhammad Jaffar Habib. After eight years, the second party Rohingya Liberation Party (RLP) was formed on 15 July 1972 under the leadership of Moulvi Jaffar, and in 1974 the number of freedom fighters was increased to 500. To avoid and stop the freedom movements of RLP and RPF, the Myanmar government launched large scale military operations and it succeeded to some extent in suppressing the voice of the Muslims who were rising for freedom.<sup>12</sup>

At that time, thousands of Rohingya Muslims crossed the border and took refuge in Bangladesh. In 1982, the RPF also gained the support of many religious groups, including the Jammāt-e-Islami, Hizb-ul-Islam, and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen. In the same year Myanmar

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> James Hookway, “Rohingya Refugee Crises Likely to Ease During Monsoon but Only Temporary”, *The Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 2015

<sup>10</sup> *The Economist*, May 23, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> *Al-Jazeera*, April 23, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> “Rohingya Refugee Crises Shames Southeast Asia”, *The Japan Times*, May 22, 2015.

government introduced Burmese citizenship law, according to which Rohingya Muslims were not given citizenship rights.<sup>13</sup>

RPF founded Rohingya solidarity organization (RSO) and RSO continued to help Rohingya Muslims by setting up camp in Bangladesh. As a result, the Myanmar government also launched operation Clean and Beautiful Nation to remove the RSO from the borders of Bangladesh and Myanmar.<sup>14</sup> In 1992, two lac and fifty thousand Rohingya Muslims were forcibly evicted from Rakhine State, and as a result, clashes broke out between the Myanmar government and RSO. Massive damage, loss of life, and the property were seen in Rakhine state. This extremism was even greater in the aftermath of 9/11 when a report surfaced that the leaders of Rohingya Freedom Movements were allied with Al-Qaeda and freedom fighters trained in Afghanistan and Libya. When the report published the atrocities and riots against Rohingya Muslims increased on large scale.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4 Rohingya Genocide

The genocide of Rohingya Muslims consists of two seasons; the first military crackdown was started in October 2016 to the next year January 2017, and the second in August 2017. As a result of this crackdown, millions of Rohingya Muslims were displaced in different countries e.g. India, Thailand, Sri Lanka Malaysia, and Bangladesh. Most of the refugees migrated to Bangladesh and set up the world's largest refugee camp. In Rakhine State, at the end of 2016 clashes broke out between the armed forces and police. Myanmar's armed forces have also been involved in genocide before this incident.<sup>16</sup>

“Myanmar armed forces and police started a major crackdown in late 2016 and targeted Muslims living in Rakhine state which is the north-western region of Burma (Myanmar). Many UN agencies have also expressed concern that the Burmese Military has been involved in many genocide and racism. These include the International Criminal Courts officials, human rights groups, journalists and governments. The UN has also found widespread evidence that Burma's military has committed human rights violations, including extra judicial killing, gang rapes, arson of Rohingya villages, businesses, schools and infanticides”.<sup>17</sup>

According to the report of January 2018, about 24000 Rohingya Muslims were killed and 18000 girls and women raped and sexual violence. Ten million Muslims were badly beaten while 36 thousand were thrown into the fire alive. According to a UN report, 7

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<sup>13</sup> Dawn, September 22, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> The Daily Star, May 24, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> The Guradian, June 2, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Rohingya Crises, *UNICEF Report*, July 1, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Geeta Mohan, “India: Bangladesh discuss Rohingya Crises”, *India Times*, September 15, 2017.

million people were forcibly evicted from Rakhine state.<sup>18</sup> The refugee took refuge in refugee camps in Bangladesh from early 2018 until September. The extreme cruelty was that the migrating Muslims were fired upon openly by the Myanmar Army and their bodies were thrown into the Naaf River. Hundreds of villages of Rohingya Muslims were burnt to ashes. In just one week, a thousand Muslims were brutally murdered. According to the Human Rights Watch Report of December 2017, almost 354 villages were burned in the Rakhine State. Another extreme oppression in the oppressed Rakhine state was international media were not allowed from reporting and newspapers were also banned. Furthermore, Reuter's journalists were arrested on December 12, 2017. On February 1, 2018, the Myanmar court refused to release the journalists on bail, but due to the personal interest of the UN Secretary-General, they were finally released on May 7, 2018.<sup>19</sup>

## 5 International Reaction on Rohingya Muslims

International intervention in the religion-based genocide and massacre has been disappointing. In response to the clearance operation by Myanmar Army, the developed countries of the world also warned the Myanmar Government but these atrocities continued. The British Prime Minister Theresa May and UN Secretary of State Rex Tillerson called all these atrocities an ethnic cleansing while the French President Emmanuel Macron called it genocide. Finally on September 12, 2018, according to some eyewitnesses, almost 875 interviews were conducted and due to which the Myanmar government has strongly opposed the International Humanitarian Law and International Humanitarian Rights.<sup>20</sup>

“All NGO's including UN agencies and humanitarian agencies of the entire world is bound by the humanitarian principle of humanity and human rights to promote human freedom in the world. According to the 2018 independent fact-finding mission report, UN peacekeeping agencies were well known for Rohingya persecution for nearly three decades, that is why from 1992 to the present UN agencies have left five special reporters to cover the human rights situation in Myanmar. However the Independent Fact-Finding Mission Report noted that Myanmar was again identified as a difficult crises situation requiring a human rights response by the entire United Nations, this view was rare, if ever, human rights agencies continued to prioritise development goals especially humanitarian access and quiet diplomacy”.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Richard C. Paddock, “Myanmar General's Purge of Rohingya Lifts his Popular Support”, *The New York Times*, October 3, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> *Dhaka Tribune*, August 23, 2018.

The Rohingya riots, which became the focus of global attention in 2017, finally got the full support of the UN. According to New York Times, a resolution was presented to the UN General Assembly in which it strongly condemned the atrocities against Rohingya Muslims and Myanmar's government immediately stopped hating Rohingya Muslims after its approval.<sup>22</sup> Based on an emergency notice, peace was ordered in the Rakhine state, but criticizing that notice the Myanmar President said,

“Another dual and classic episode of double standards, selective and discriminatory application of human rights norms designed to exert unwanted political pressure on Myanmar”.<sup>23</sup>

That resolution also appealed to the armed forces of Myanmar to protect minorities and bring justice to those who persecuted them as soon as possible. In January 2020, the ICJ ordered the Myanmar Government to stop the genocide before which the Myanmar government turned a blind eye to Security Council's orders.<sup>24</sup>

## 6 Cold Shoulder of Powerful Sates on Rohingya Crises

The four most powerful countries in the region China, India, Russia, and the US have not spoken out against the Rohingya Muslims, and the biggest reason for this is the mistreatment and genocide of their Muslim majority. China has been mistreating Uyghur Muslims while India has also been committing genocide in Kashmir for years. Russia is also persecuting Muslims of Chechnya and the US has also considered Muslims their enemy since 9/11 due to which Islamophobia has been highly present in American Society.<sup>25</sup> Moreover Myanmar Rohingya Muslims areas are abundant with natural gas and oil reserves. Minerals supply has made Myanmar a strategic partner of the world's major powers. This area is of special importance for China's Belt and Road initiative program.<sup>26</sup> India Russia gas pipeline and exploration projects for their natural gas reserves make Myanmar geopolitical theatre. India also needs to have good relations with Myanmar for the survival and security of its North East areas. Due to these reasons, these major powers have not yet put pressure on Myanmar's government to end the riots. If the major powers put their interest behind them, they can play an important role in eliminating the Rohingya Crises.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Dawn*, February 7, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> *The Express Tribune*, June 30, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> “Aung San Suu Kyi: Myanmar Democracy Icon who Fell from Grace”, *BBC Report*, March 5, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>26</sup> “Culture, Context and Mental Health of Rohingya Refugees”, UNHCR Report.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*.



## 7 The indifference of Myanmar Leader

The deep silence on these inhuman riots and genocide by the government, especially its political and democratic prominent leader Aung San Suu Kyi is a testament to the fact that in the Buddhist majority country, which has been a proponent of peace, the Muslim minority has been infested and also despised. Myanmar's most important figure, who won the noble peace prize in 1991, has spent the precious time of her life from 1989 to 2010 in exile.

Aung San finally won elections in 2015 and after the 25<sup>th</sup> year of Martial law ended. But she failed to become president because her husband and children are foreign nationals. Suu Kyi was seen as a symbol of peace for her services to Myanmar such as the overthrow of the military government and the restoration of democracy but she was widely criticized for not stopping the Rohingya crisis and during these riots, her image is internationally deteriorated.<sup>28</sup>

“The international supporters and fans of Miss Suu Kyi accused her that she had not taken any steps to end this genocide especially women rapes and murders within the state. There is also outraged at the fact that she has not spoken out against the powerful military operations and atrocities”.<sup>29</sup>

As a result of not helping the helpless Muslims and appeasing Buddhists, she again gained a landslide majority in the 2020 elections but now she is in custody and facing several court cases.

## 8 Current Situation

This year in 2021, these riots will touch the 5 years and the entire world is also suffering from the epidemic of Corona Virus. The oppressed and helpless Rohingya Muslims of Rakhine State were forced to live in Bangladesh. These oppressed Muslims have never had access to education, health, and jobs in Myanmar. The riots displaced nearly 100000 Muslims and they are now facing the Corona Virus epidemic.

During their stay in Bangladesh, these refugees are also at risk of flooding and landslides. Refugee camps are also vulnerable and temporary and they can fall at any time. Many private organizations are also helping the refugees.<sup>30</sup>

“Organizations are maintaining a combination of life-saving integrated nutrition support, livelihood development, disaster risk deduction, non-food item distributions, and home gardening initiatives. The main aim of different organizations is to help the Rohingya stay

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<sup>28</sup> “Special Report: Fading Icon What Happened to Aung San Suu Kyi”, *Reuters*, December 19, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Daily Tribune, October 15, 2018.



healthy, care for their families and live with as much security and dignity a possible. The biggest focuses are safeguarding against weather-related disasters and responding to COVID-19”.<sup>31</sup>

Due to these migrants especially in Bangladesh, there has been a lot of socio-environmental economic pressure. The settlement and permanent residence of these migrants have become a huge challenge for economically developing Bangladesh. In a society, Muslims and non-Muslims have equal rights and the rights of the Minority must be protected in the same way as the majority.

The state ensures the safety of the minorities living within it, so that no one harms the minorities. The state grants property rights to Muslim minority and non Muslim minority and it does not order them to be deported without any reason. The atrocities against Rohingya Muslims have crossed all boundaries; this oppression with the followers of Islam is a question mark for the entire world and Muslim Ummah. Our Deen Islam teaches us to treat minorities well, and history has shown that minorities have never been wronged in an Islamic welfare state. Peace can be established all over the world by spreading Islamic teaching in their true spirit; Myanmar government must do justice to its Muslim minorities, in the same way, it is possible to end these riots.

## 9 Recommendations

- OIC should play a positive role in the persecution of Rohingya Muslims; Sadly, the OIC has never taken any action against genocide and oppression of Muslims around the world. Now is the time for all Muslims to stand against the Rohingya genocide.
- The international media was prevented from reporting on the genocide of Rohingya Muslims. It is very lacking that all Muslim countries do not have their united media which brings unity and consensus to the Muslim world. The Muslim world should have an electronic and print media platform so that we can bring all our issues in front of the world.
- All the noble and rich Muslim people from all over the world should do their best to help the Rohingya Muslims so that they can live a quite good life and meet the basic requirements of daily routine.
- Internationally, the United States government should put pressure on Myanmar’s government not to treat its minority in a bad way, but to consider it a part of the country.

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<sup>31</sup> “Bangladesh is now home to Rohingya Refugees”, *The Washington Post*, October 25, 2017.

## 10 CONCLUSION

The genocide and atrocities that have taken place in the state of Rakhine even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are unprecedented and reprehensible. Rohingya Muslims have been persecuted for years, 2017 proves to be a year of doom for them when racial riots have reached their peak, murder and rape have become common and millions are also expelled from Rakhine state. The Rohingya freedom movement also failed to stop the atrocities and the Myanmar government stopped the international media from reporting on the genocide and its main purpose was to deprive the world of reality. The international reaction to these riots was also disappointing. No country took practical action to stop the atrocities, but sympathy for the Rohingya Muslims was limited to pieces of paper. Even the UN resolution could not stop this genocide and the Myanmar government crossed all the lines of oppression with minorities.

About seven million Rohingya Muslims have so far resided in India, China, and Most of Bangladesh; they have been housed in temporary shelters. Aid is also being provided by some private organizations including food, medicines, clothes, and books. However, the OIC did not play a positive role and the Muslim world could not raise its voice against the genocide of these oppressed Muslims. During the Rohingya riots, all Islamic countries should have come together on one platform and raised their voices but the lack of unity and personal interest became an obstacle in the way of the Muslim Ummah and these riots are still a question mark on the unity of the Muslim world.



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